

Burn Barrels: A Burning Health Problem



What's so bad about burn barrels?

Maybe you guessed that smoke from your burn barrel isn't good for you, but do you know how bad it really is? The immediate affects are:

- Eye, nose, and throat irritation
- Lung irritation and congestion
- Skin irritations and burns
- Stomach or intestinal upset
- Headache or memory loss

The increased risk of long-term health problems:

- Cancer
- Leukemia
- Asthma
- Immune System Changes
- Learning Disorders
- Birth Defects
- Infertility

When you choose to burn, you affect not just your own health, but the health of your children, your neighbors, and your animals. Children, teenagers, pregnant women, and the elderly are at highest risk.

Burn barrels are especially bad because the fires burn at low temperatures. They receive very little oxygen and produce a lot of smoke that contains toxic substances. What's worse is that almost all of the pollutants released into the air are close to the ground where they are easily inhaled.

Did you know it is illegal to burn the following materials?

- Garbage
- Plastic
- Paper
- Cardboard
- Asphalt
- Any substance other than natural vegetation, when burned, releases toxic emissions, dense smoke or obnoxious odors
- Rubber products
- Treated wood
- Petroleum products
- Dead animals

It is illegal to burn all of the above materials because they release toxic substances when they are burned. In fact, burning anything in burn barrels is illegal (WAC 173-425-050(5)). Unprocessed natural vegetation is the only thing you can burn legally, and then only if you live outside urban areas and you follow local permitting guidelines. Check with your local air pollution control authority or fire protection district for regulations in your area.

We've always done it that way!

A generation ago, trash consisted largely of paper, wood, food and yard waste. Today, trash often contains plastics, metals, rubber, synthetic cloth and chemicals. Even the slick, colored paper of magazines and the see-through plastic portions of billing envelopes send toxic fumes into the air. A few of the toxic chemicals released are dioxins, benzene, nitrogen oxides, and toluene. These chemicals enter the air, soil, groundwater and food supply.

Tests performed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency show that daily dioxin emissions from household barrels used by two to 40 families equal the air pollution from a garbage incinerator that serves thousands of families. All of this pollution is released in your backyard!

How can I protect myself and my family?

The best way to protect yourself is to not burn. Choose a different method of disposing of your garbage. Here are some alternatives to burning:

1. REDUCE your household waste. Choose products with less packaging – especially plastic.
2. REUSE products and packaging as much as possible. Donate unwanted clothing, furniture and toys to friends or charities. Give unwanted magazines to hospitals or nursing homes. Mend and repair rather than discard and replace.
3. RECYCLE newspaper, plastic, glass and metal. You might even be able to recycle mixed paper, cardboard and other materials.
4. COMPOST organic kitchen waste and yard waste. Compost or pile everything in a heap in your yard. While the ash from your barrel is dangerous on your garden – the compost is great. Chip large branches and use as mulch.
5. DISPOSAL: As a last resort have your household waste picked up by a licensed waste removal company or take it to a licensed disposal facility (landfill or incinerator).

What about the cost?

Many residents have turned to burning more of their trash as garbage fees increase. This may seem like a good idea, but a great deal more than saving money is involved in this choice. Besides health concerns, you may be fined hundreds or thousands of dollars for creating a public health hazard.

What if my neighbor is burning?

If you have a complaint about someone who is burning illegally, you can call the Department of Ecology's toll free complaint line at 1-866-211-6284.

For more information on outdoor burning contact the Department of Ecology's Agricultural and Outdoor Burning Program at (509) 329-3400.